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James McKean

WHISPERING IN PENNY'S EAR

For she has slept beside me above bags of potatoes and onions
beside old ladies three bunks down on the overnight from Brindisi,
and packed suitcases and walked the narrow streets lost
in a new language each day and washed our socks and hung them
in the window open on a square, its tables and coffee and pigeons,
and eaten hard bread or none at all and refolded maps and climbed
and descended stairs, walls, ruins, streets, and hills, a hand up,
a hand down, each place we found amending our idea of place,
blinking and yawning each morning between cobblestones and the ancient
blue sky. For we are telling an old story of ourselves that isn't finished,
and for this she waits, sitting a moment in Termini station
until I return with tickets and schedules and suitcases, my eyes lifted up
to cities rolling by on screens. This was my idea, I confess, and now,
dropping my eyes, I see her across the station staring straight ahead,
someone next to her, leaning on his elbow to whisper in her ear,
a brilliantined, square-jawed, eyebrow-arched quoter of Catullus, no doubt,
in good socks and shiny shoes, his name ending in a vowel,
his free hand tracing roses in the smoky air. And for her
I bring from the cold north the history of Rome, Visigoth and Vandal,
the hoards come to talk about their taxes, tired of mud and too few lire,
having walked for weeks to get here. And for her I sack the chair
beside her friend—a senator, I hope—and lay my bags at his feet and fill
the air with garlic and onion and manure and plowed fields,
the north wind and its intimations of winter, and shake my newspaper
open to the want ads and explain that he will be one more chapter
in our story, an invitation he declines and rises, leaving
an empty chair between her and me and three days in Rome for us to fill.